

BLEEDING HEART YARD



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1992

William SCAMMELL

PETERLOO POETS

BLEEDING HEART YARD

by the same poet

Yes & No (Peterloo Poets, 1979)

A Second Life (Peterloo Poets, 1982)

Jouissance (Peterloo Poets, 1985)

Editor: *Between Comets: for Norman Nicholson at 70* (Taxus Press, 1985)

Eldorado (Peterloo Poets, 1987)

Keith Douglas: a study (Faber & Faber, 1987)

Editor: *The New Lake Poets* (Bloodaxe Books, 1991)

Bleeding Heart Yard

WILLIAM SCAMMELL



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First published in 1992
by Peterloo Poets
2 Kelly Gardens, Calstock, Cornwall PL18 9SA, U.K.

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**A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library**

ISBN 1-871471-28-1

Printed in Great Britain by
Latimer Trend & Company Ltd, Plymouth

PR
6069
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B62
1992
✓
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS to the editors of *Critical Quarterly*, *Gown*, *The Honest Ulsterman*, *Iron*, *The Jacaranda Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *London Magazine*, *Poetry Durham*, *Poetry Matters*, *PN Review*, *Poetry Review*, *Quartz*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *Verse*, in whose pages some of these poems first appeared.

'Dunmail Raise' won a Sotheby's Award in the 1987 Arvon International Poetry Competition, and was first published in the *1987 Anthology* (Arvon Foundation, 1989), selected by Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney.

'The Emperor of China' was first published in *New Writing from the North* (MidNAG, 1988), ed. Dick Davies and David Williams.

'A World Elsewhere' won first prize in the 1989 National Poetry Competition, and was first published in the *1989 Prize Winners* anthology (Poetry Society, 1990).

'Green Over Blue' was first published in the *Poetry Book Society Anthology 1990-91* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1991), ed. Anne Stevenson.

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INVESTMENT

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A World Elsewhere

1. THE VISIT

There were barns, paddocks,
young fruit trees coquetting
in the rain and thrum of wind.
It blew so hard the awning
of the outside love-seat split
a little further every hour.

Tall dogs with silky hair
slipped moorings by the Aga
gliding up to my strange scent;
the squash-faced semi-precious cat
subsided into a hump; and you
sat down, oblique and fine as
an old-fashioned stroke of the pen.

All the covers of the novels kiss.
Five chickens cluck in the yard
like perfect readers, wanting more
and more from the rich yawny air,
to which they held one claw up
in mid-strut. When the time came

you fed us all we needed,
baroque vespers after a light supper
of green salad and talk
served up with a rainbow trout.
I like your vestal nightie,
sloping eyes, big girlish feet
better than the small history
we made ourselves to make that night.

2. NOT MARBLE

Beatrice, Laura, and the Dark Lady are
discovered over a litter of tableware
with second cups of coffee, chocolate mints,
liqueurs, the viol's languid impudence.

Candour shines from each immortal eye.
Two handsome serving men are waved away.
Someone pulls out an exquisite handkerchief
and dabs her nose. They laugh, and laugh, and laugh.

3. KIEV (after Mandelstam)

Last night the army trundled out of town
on the last streetcar, hugging its wounded. One
great bloodstained overcoat was calling out
'Don't worry, we'll be back among you! Soon!'

Bleeding Heart Yard

Is where you go to buy the finest paper
gathered under an English sky.
The wiring looped up in the corner
is the scribbled ghost of Hokusai,
the rafters Dürer's signature.

They are keeping one eye on the rag trade
and one on the clientèle,
nails pointilliste in blue and red,
clothes flaring round them like a sail
let out to catch the lightest mood.

Nothing is lost either on the old Ralph
Roister Doister who mans the shop,
monkeying up to the topmost shelf
or naming the name of a fellowship
that's shy of people. 'Help yourself'

he says to the punters. They do and must,
stroking the paper as if it were
all the first things and the last,
a favourite daughter's thatch of hair,
thin flake of the moon, a creamy dust.

Their right hand itches, and the juice works
in their mouths. What invitations
to spill the beans, take lines for walks,
or post a statement to the nation,
blind Homer's eyes for a watermark

rough as justice, age-old, sore:
tablets for all the shapes and sizes
of wishes and wants edging round the door,
the artist's hurt, the model's poses,
the face that never lifts from the floor.

All four winds sough in the paper. Welcome
to their rich laurels and distresses.
Welcome to Tracy and Mnemosyne,
Hokusai's numberless addresses
sown like grain from a careless palm.

That girl will forever be flying her kite
over the rooftop of youth
while some old duffer falls for art
and the standing committee on God's truth
stumbles into the failing light.

Flying to Agra

The waiters wore elaborate turbans
which somehow increased the sadness
of their pointed slippers and pantaloons,
emerging from Mount Rushmore faces
to extend the franchise of rice.

Chopin proved to be in the keeping
of the hotel's sixteen-year-old daughter
who joined me in the leafy swimming pool
at the bottom of the garden where
turbid water dozed off in the sun.

I was on hand to stage tourist arrivals
incontrovertibly in front of the Taj
and send them taxiing on to Delhi.
She held my hand in the cinema, tight,
keeping it well and truly joined

as the heroine raised her larynx
over the sub-continent. Then billiards
at the club with the man who sold me
a ruby ring. I impressed everyone
with the quality of my losing hazards,

learned from my father as a boy.
Chopin floated from the hotel verandah.
There was a dawn chorus like *Belshazzar's Feast*.
Back to the ship in Bombay in a sealed
compartment. I remembered a shabby bear

on a road, in chains. I remembered
the tree of vultures. I saw myself
seeing the Taj in all lights, and getting
my reflections right, and wishing we had
that tremendous palm-to-palm goodbye.

When they play a note they bend it
so it talks itself to silence, coming
back round the dark side of the wrist
while moonlight shivers all along
the water, and the sympathetic humans
vibrate with a long slow shake of the head.

Man and Woman at a Casement

Fra Filippo Lippi

As well they might be
hatted and head-dressed
with her level eye
imperiously loosed
at his more than glance,
the pleasant impertinence

called youth. There's just a slice
of his face, only greedy
for love. Summoned or lost
to the necessity
that's her? Unreadable,
therefore she's the tall

order of the luxurious two,
hands folded, calm, pale, rich
in presence, propriety,
virginal pearl necklace
warming to the deep red
stuff in which she's cosseted,

fair hair scraped back
under her elaborate
jewelled untouchable look
that calmly cries out
to be touched, despite
or because of her state

in the grand Florentine
order of things, where girls
turn women at thirteen,
consequently marriageable
at a price he may determine
with that bold looking-in.

Nowadays they would meet
at a party or a club,
she consciously bright
and me a bit glib
with my heavens above
looks worn on my sleeve,

my bibliographical thanks
for such grave princesses
as I got in the drinks
and warmed to existence's
mania for the scarlet
embrasures of thought.

Retrospective

Gwen John's women only just
make it onto the canvas. Pale blue's
the colour of the birth they choose
not to announce. They're fading fast

into a future of unreachable
addresses, high single bed,
cats, letters posted or unposted,
three or four cowslips on the table

murmuring of Ophelia's trailed coat,
one fork and spoon, devoutly crossed,
some sort of mirror, spotted with rust,
a knife-edge cameo at the throat.

Any minute now the master
will come hurrying in from the storm
with the tablets smoking under his arm—
the ultimate disaster.

On the run-up to my 49th birthday

Oh, but the hand that holds her breast is grassy!
—Brecht

Here's a black felt slipper on a foot
three parts submerged in sock
like Chairman Mao swimming down the Yellow River.

My stomach creeps outward
in a fine friendship with the earth
like Chairman Mao swimming down the Yellow River.

There is time on my hands, and a fat
lot of geography in my address book
like Chairman Mao swimming down the Yellow River.

Mother came to stay with her death inside her
making its way gradually out to us
like Chairman Mao swimming down the Yellow River.

In the handbag were lipstick and mirror
clacking against a comb with rounded teeth
like Chairman Mao swimming down the Yellow River.

I have renewed the cat, installed
a goldfish who does modern dance
like Chairman Mao swimming down the Yellow River.

It's a long march, a long swim.
You'd never believe it. These feet have seen
Chairman Mao swimming down the Yellow River.

Holding the Surface

'Just listen to this,' you say, deep
into the words of your favourite
as we sit with the wounded envelopes
of the morning post, and the coffee pot.

This is a good time, round the table,
cherishing an unused day,
you with your specs, Platonic owl
consulting the book across your knee

and me not listening, because I want
out of the babble of other men's art,
to carry my lusciously silent tongue
upstairs, to a quiet place apart.

And this annoys you, that time and again
I'm full of me, like a jug of cream
reserved for a corner table of one
that won't be poured till kingdom come.

But it isn't that. I like the peaceful
tilt of you, head, book, and cup.
I like the light along the table
holding the surface to its lip.

The green blind stirs. Pale sun slants in,
the handle of your lightest brush,
loading our Dutch-quotidian
exactly as a granted wish.

Inventions

i.m. Norman Nicholson, 1914-1987

1.

There are lakes in our region
small English lakes
with even smaller islands floating in them
holding a dark stand of trees.

Only the very luckiest roots
get taken on there.

2.

All down the coast old factories
revert to soil and scrub.
It doesn't take much to heave off
raw industrial brick.
But these old trees are tough. They bow
to no-one but themselves.

3.

Water hammers on the beach,
dimples in the lake,
it holds up its dress this way
and that way in the beck.

There floats the island
which is a fist of earth
or an invention of the mind.

Just one step, it says,
just one more step
and either the world will open
or it will have dodged back
into your pocket, like a coin.

4.

I was late for your funeral, Norman.
The wind blew against me, the car
slowed, three Herdwicks skittered
on the narrow Thirlmere road.

It seemed to take forever to get round
and round to your spit of land.

I came back by the coast under Black Combe,
thus making of it a round trip.
The June fields grew a yellowish grass,
that shade old Faber covers
fade to, when a book was a real book.

Faces

Those Slav faces
are hollowed flints, striking fire
in the back of the cave. Or a thin ice
of counts and princes
clashing gently under the chandelier.

They will address
themselves only to man's fate,
the woman question, farming, how to bless
affairs of heart and of the state
with godliness,

that tender howl
of aspiration, torn straight from the beast's back
and thrown across superfluous man
whose shivering soul
craves warmth and reason.

They had messages
for the world, or so they thought,
which ran to love, forgiveness, holy fools
in many thousand pages
few could read, and fewer bought;

nobles and peasants
in a dream of peace, a panacea
devoutly to be wished,
as one class got itself a big idea
and the other washed.

See Dostoyevsky
declaiming at the statue's foot,
the open-mouthed world proletariat
marching along Nevsky
chanting for writers to be shot.

The big, big tune
deep thinkers were to teach the west
went flat. Tchaikovsky beat his spacious breast.

The dying swan
tipped under. Yet the violin

persists, wants
'something higher' counted among
our small denominations (as we fence
the infill sites
for one more shopping precinct):

which has to do
with something lower, kindliness
for instance, paddling its wares like ducks and drakes
in search of food
and warmth on winter lakes.

Relatively
few of the old absolutes
survive flea markets and the heightened brow,
save those fur hats
whose faces face the music now,

high cheeks still tart
as Cubist paintings, bearing down
on Red Square's crate
of upturned faces, forever asking
that old burning question

conscience can't shrug off
with Stateside orthodontics, politesse
sub-Windsor style, French elegance,
while the great bell of Kiev
booms out its bronze defiance . . .

faces you could
split the atom with, or get drunk
with, dive into vowels deep as tidal pools,
come up for air with a mad monk
or Gogol's fools

then hibernate
with loveable Oblomov, who
can't be fussed with madam's *érotique*
and patent leather shoe
while there's a pillow for his neck—

the neck Ras-
kolnikov took an axe to, in
another context. The Russian thought-police
are tireless,
both for good and ill. That pain,

that nameless pain
existence on a blowy day
pinned to your chest,
is it of the highest, the very best,
or just a speck the wind will blow away?

Neighbours

If God had meant us to settle in communes
or move in next to our best friends He
would never have invented La Rochefoucauld
and games of chance, the yale lock, the ingle
nook, telephones, the dog's incessant itch to bark
first and wag later. It would be like living
on muesli or monads, doing ourselves nothing
but good, which is a destructive scenario.

Look at the Bloomsberries, kissing and calling,
in and out of each other's pockets like billiard balls,
or the Tolstoyans who moved in high above Slad
in their pacific sandals and tiny wood houses
after the Great War, setting their feet down
thoughtfully on the scarp. Intellectual consanguinity
is deficient in roughage. You can landscape a
landscape, knowing full well that summer's grand slam
will defeat you, but human engineering is always
a mistake. Witness the slums of Bogotá, the breeding
techniques of royalty—all those pearly vowels
strung out on threadbare genes. No wonder they
slammed doors of the pyramids tight shut.

Better to bow to the gods of rough justice
who put up this street and hid its deep grammar
from all but those who whistle on ladders
and grow their own jam. The highest merit lies
in the slightly-oiled salesman, the solicitor's Volvo,
its sidelights' eternal flame, the diurnal jingles
of the fish-van coaxing a widow out of purdah
to set the brass weights moving on cold scales.

Bad luck to the school of like minds
if they don't break a mental leg somewhere
on this terrain, which is rough as a bed
of oysters, crusted with pure contingency.
Strange forms of life live on the backs

and fronts of our neighbours, salutary
fronds, retributive mandibles, innumerable modes
of ingestion and digestion, whose consciousness
raises and lowers itself. This is the great
good place, the watering-hole, the sparrow-jump
where moss colonises the roof-slates, tomatoes
giggle on window-sills, soot grows up the chimney
like a larch, and at supper everyone eats right down
to the lovers on their bridge of sighs.

Through Glass

To Ben on his 21st birthday

You came too soon. We had no money then.
No sense either. The flat was cramped and small.
Books, pictures, egos littered every wall.
A rubber plant stood in for England's Eden.
Students, we thought the sun would never set
on the crown of our first mushroom omelette.

You came too soon, lighter by several pounds
than textbook babies were supposed to be,
and lay there in a capsule nursery
with tubes and flexes monitoring your wounds,
as though the journey had exhausted all
your powers of being. Young but stoical

the three of us began to learn to live
and you were slowly nurtured, under glass,
instead of sprawling at your mother's breast
which ached with all the love she had to give.
It beamed in through the unit, through the trees,
powering the tigers on the nursery frieze.

We broke the glass at last, and took you home,
and laid you down among superfluous toys
whose colours were another burst of sunrise.
You seemed quite comfortable with your fame,
yawned once or twice, practised a newly deep
uncomprehending stare, and fell asleep.

So then we lived by weights, clocks, temperatures,
the inside of the wrist, a holy spot
most apt to speak of our unending plot
to fatten up your poles and hemispheres.
Your eyes swam so far up into your head
I thought you'd drowned, and all aboard were dead,

capsized in this niagara of warm milk . . .
But no, you'd just elected to drift off
and sway suspended like a piece of kelp,
leaving behind an odoriferous burp
that said, in cartoon bubbles, Just a tick.
Don't go away, you two, I'll soon be back!

I strolled the lovely squares and terraces
where Clifton falls away, like Babylon,
into the arms of Hotwells, and the Avon
winds through gorges that it never muddies,
though smells of slavery still hang about
the Grand Hotel's old kitchen porter's light.

What was I wedded to? Ah that, that was
the question. Where did Hamlet and my wife
debate the mephistophelean terms of life;
and what was marriage anyway, to cause
such daily ructions as disturbed the peace
of married folk, in 1966?

Royal York Crescent put its balconies,
its flagstones, railings, sweetly curving mind,
its airy rooms, with boards of polished sand,
at the beck and call of student reveries.
Many a hand went to a noble brow
and dropped no whit the wiser. Anyhow

you looked at it love in the books was not
quite on all fours with us, whose little trick
of running ourselves ragged was the *ding an sich*
both Kant and Buddha took their potshots at
from comfortable distances, secure
in their exact, regressive sinecure.

Reason, I gradually came to think,
is the most battered wife there ever was,
clipped and confined in bogus essences,
abused by every genius and crank
who says he likes this bit of her, or that,
and claps the rest beneath his foolish hat.

The wrong time is the one precisely right.
Who'd touch a lip to order, save up hard
and calculate the life they can afford?
Or bow to logic, wisdom? Legislate
a narrowing of mind, to fit in thought
between the ears of Plato, or Descartes?

I cannot like those childless couples who
brush specks of dust off coffee tables, books,
arrange their magazines in wooden racks,
write up a diary, play at peekaboo
at dinner parties, concerts, therapists,
and waft deep fragrances on dainty wrists.

In labs, in libraries, in honeycombs
where queen bees of the intellect loll at ease
there are exact equivalents of these
polishing up their matchless theorems,
whose progeny are footnotes, born to sting
marauding facts to death as they fly in.

Item: each maker is an autocrat
in thrall to hierarchies of common sense.

Item: instinct is its own recompense.

Item: pure mess and muddle is the cat
who licks the cream, purrs *Quis custodiat?*

Item: art or life in the bassinet?

Some such inarticulate bellyache
rested, oh Ben, upon your coming here,
the melancholy, long withdrawing roar
of my commitment to life for art's sake.
Whereof I could not speak, I thought that brains
would scour the murky stuff out of my veins.

So nursing you on one arm, nursing me,
my marriage, and my studies on the other,
tiptoeing round *Tractatus* and the weather
that blows through every new-born family
I hatched out parlous footnotes on To be . . .
brooding on love's responsibility.

All parents are beginners, *faute de mieux*.
You practise on the first one. No-one knows
what they most need to, or where knowledge grows.
The curse or cry that first comes echoing through
delivery rooms is the divining call
peculiar to this bare, forked animal

and who or where it comes from, what it plumbs
or points to, is anybody's guess,
and so, between the starlight and the grass,
we suck opposable, intellectual thumbs
as if, by *Philosophical Investigations*,
we'd hush that noise, and all the noise of nations.

Clifton Bridge arched over the abyss.
The camera obscura gentled all:
all dreamlike, sad, and wholly beautiful,
heartbreaking woods, the gloomy haunts of Dis,
rust on the leaves, a swift Homeric gleam
lighting the knife-edge of that placid stream.

Just there, where mind is dumb, was our good place
and yours . . . weighed in at nothing very much.
Your infant diet was impossibly rich,
your parents barely of the human race
up in that eyrie, balanced on a shout
I still can't fathom, till I write it out

or try to, and grow dizzy with my lust
to lay the ghost of error, fasten names
dispassionate as moss that slowly swims
across the gouged-out lettering of the past
on the unnameable, that fell from space
to earth, bearing its name upon your face.

The Emperor of China

after Heine

My father was a dry old stick,
a martyr to angina
but me, I wet my lips, and I'm
the Emperor of China.

It has green fingers, my sweet schnapps,
it sows a wild perfume
and when I look into my mind
all China is in bloom!

The swamps dry out, the peasants turn
to happy nymphs and gentle swains.
One glance from me, my wife swells up
melodiously with labour pains.

The sick take up their beds and walk.
The civil service goes to work.
All error dies. Peace takes root.
The PM budgets on his flute.

Asparagus instead of rice
is what my people eat.
The pingpong fans dance on the green
by two and two, with nimble feet.

And palace mandarins file out
to smile a meum, tuum,
pigtales flying roundabout
the Heavenly Bicycle Museum.

All the temples fill with souls,
with incense, and with prophecies;
bandits take up begging bowls;
the Jews convert, on bended knees.

Then all the bigwigs vote themselves
out of a job, for love of China.
Rule over us, you poets, rule
flat out, like Heinrich Heine!

*

I drink too much, the doctor says.
Much he knows, of words or wine.
Here's a health, a Marseillaise
in mandarin. This empire's mine!

North

'I'll tell you, that being passed through Highgate, there
I was saluted by the country air . . .
And (which I'm sure you long to know) set forth
In Northern song my journey to the North'

—Charles Cotton, *'Epistle to John Bradshaw, Esq'*

Three hundred and thirty years ago, it took
the northern bard and part-time rake
four days, and heaven knows how many horses,
pints and pies and coachman's curses,
to shift himself upcountry, landing where
the Dove hems rocky Staffordshire.

Bucking and bouncing up the motorway
we do it now in half a day
dodging between the artics and the laws
like nifty pilots in *Star Wars*
one eye out for the cops, and one on dials
monitoring our fancy wheels

while Mozart, handy-packed onto a tape,
carves time into sonata-shape
and all the Domesday census rushes by
in micro-twinklings of an eye
which rests, unresting, on a hawk that stalls
above the mole's blue overalls.

Once there, in Peak, or Dale, or Fell, wherever
the hills accelerate a river
and Mother offers up into the skies
her breastwork of allegories
I cut the engine, shut the terrace door,
'The same dull Northern clod I was before.'

In my case, Charles, there's money to be earned
and, inbetween, my fingers burned
on vernal beauties, or big-city poems
innocent of country iambs
which someone wants me to review—a foxy
raid on subtexts, done by proxy.

It doesn't make you friends, or earn much grub,
or kudos in the Groucho Club
where, I imagine, young and midlife turks
work out the status of their Works
by simple divination: who's with whom,
ascendant in the Starlight Room.

The provinces—Dutch paintings, English books,
French architecture, and French cooks,
Greek nonchalance with marble, German fugues,
Southern Comfort, Irish brogues—
are nine-tenths of the body politic,
whether the body's well or sick.

So let the capitals rave on: they're built
for pleasure, throwing out ideas.
And let the sodium lamps forever halt
the far side of this vale of tears
where greeny thoughts reach down into the clay
and glimmer there, to live or die.

The latest cosmological hunch
is that the world is out to lunch
for free. Something came out of nothing, sprang
all matter from the void, in a Big Bang
which bent the laws of physics, giving us
a ghostly glimpse of Genesis . . .

Mirror speaks unto mirror, as it can:
a quantum leap from space to man
who holds the memory of nothingness
as close, Charles, as the natal mess
of parturition, and the traveller's code
for getting up the Great North Road.

Your politics aren't mine; yet we'd agree
precisely nothing is for free—
not physics, metaphysics, roundheads, square,
young fogeys, old ones, clodhop, squire;
not dithyrambs, to turn a lovely head,
nor quarks, with bony wrists outspread.

Today the snow came down, to left and right,
rhyming with everything in sight.
Each flake was eloquent. I left my words
to scatter bread for freezing birds
and what the text was that we made, or were,
was written on that bolt of air.

Accident

The siren's thin blue alp of sound
looms up, and fades, on city streets.
An angel's fallen to the ground
bleeding in a hail of lights.

Its long, accusing finger sweeps
round asphalt, concrete, stony spire,
the unaccommodating face
to face of earth and air and fire.

Excitement glows, then, turning away
the crowd burns off in twos and threes,
is gone. The angel's here to stay,
beating its wings behind the eyes.

Trains

1
If ever there was a vehicle for nostalgia

2
Puffing along between heaven and earth

3
There is the carriage of childhood

4
The interview that will dig up your days

5
No such thing as an undecided train

6
Throbbing and slowing. Full tilt. Inch by inch

7
Ears eyes nose hands tongue

8
There is terror of stepping on the wrong train

9
Terror of stepping on the only train

One Man

A block of flats, somewhere in Turin.
A stairwell, neither here nor there, anonymous
as scuff-marks wrappers buttons echoes.
It is the spiral steps are mounted in
with iron uprights, shabby at the knees,
a rail to haul on, bleak infinities

of doors and doorways, opened just a crack.
Warm air blurts out, to tangle in the hall
with blasts of cold. It sees a body fall
through bony floors, then spider on its back.
The telex throbs, spitting its letters home.
Implacable chatter at the gates of Rome.

Primo Levi's dead. One man has gone
back down alone, to circle endless fire.
Stigmata of pure reason and barbed wire,
whose corpus is the earth he walked upon,
receive, bind, mortify this blessed ghost,
laid down among the shadows he engrossed.

Some lines of Dante haunted him, compounded by
tormenting gaps. The dull cadavers sang
in broken words, while mothers deftly hung
out children's clothing on barbed wire to dry.
It flaps there still, the only way it can.
Clean air blows through it, moving like a tongue.

Tristia

after Mandelstam

I've studied hard to learn to say goodbye,
a word that grows enormous in the throat
like saplings looming up towards the sky
on summer nights, towards a balm of light
that sets the ox-jaw moving, and a cry
split harshly from the cockerel on the dump
as naturally as tears enlarge an eye
brushed softly by the halo of a lamp.

What nourishment is there in speech? 'Apart'
will part us, surely as the cockerel crows,
planting its arbitrary plosives in the heart.
Old fires on the Acropolis will blaze
new meaning out across wide city streets
heralding the dawn of some new age
while oxen lower heads, to grind up roots,
and roosters beat their wings in joyful rage.

Meanwhile I contemplate the love I have
for those swift crepitations of the loom,
the spindle humming like a thing alive
and shuttles fluttering out their solid flame.
The shreds are flying: all the bits of words,
the tiny wastages, the happiness
we might have woven, lovely as the braids
a woman shakes out to an oaken tress

are lost. They will be found, and lost again,
for divination, like a well-loved hymn,
is sacred to the earth; it will go on
singing from Hellas to Byzantium.
It's not for us to ponder the Greek hell
of pitted bronze, devouring of the face
by women's fingers, shrieking as they tell
each bone's exact and final resting place.

Nobody

Nobody goes barefoot here
on wide-apart hips
at one or two hours per hour
netting the olives.

No jeep sweats round the hill
with a living to make
from fish, flesh or fowl
in amplified Greek.

Green grow the rushes,
rain, slugs, tearful roses,
all the origin of species.

Bounce off the walls. Buzz on the pane.
Fetch me a word, a dagger of sun.
Clytemnestra. Agamemnon.

The Charterhouse of Nab

What happens to Fabbizio del Dongo
is lust, religion, love and war,
not necessarily in that order,
whirling round him in a latin tango.

I knew a Fabbio once. He went sailing
on Rydal Water, so good-looking
in his olive skin, his boxers, water dripping
from oiled pecs, his Sony Walkman drumming,

all the women at his language-school
forgot their verbs
and rushed to find a towel

good enough to dry off Fabs,
who'd fashion it sarong-wise, well
tucked in among that plethora of ribs.

From Pica to Mockba

The intellectual has a thousand reasons
why the case is complex, will not yield
to any of the senses or the seasons.
'Life is not a walk across a field'

says the old Russian proverb. Yet it is.
At least, the carefree poet told us so.
He preens a little, one eye on his feathers,
one on the modest bathos of his shoe . . .

or dives, like Byron, into the Grand Canal,
holding aloft a fiery, snatched flambeau
to light his way through Venice's warm swell
of church and palace, convent and bagnio.

He shakes his pelt. The marble darkens then,
mocking his ictus with a hollow shout.
Clean linen waits, a candle, and a pen.
One of his mistresses will wring him out.

Poem for a Younger Son

This one steps into an outsize pair of wings
and commits hubris that he lives to tell.
One minute a model of Epstein's rock drill,
padded and helmeted, the next he flings
his torso off the face of the fell

into strong creaky arms of wind
that dandles him up like a baby. There
all earth recedes to a miniature
of unperspectived, geometric land
and only the cloud-base sings in his ear.

I'm left behind, with an upturned face
and lurching heart, as he skates on air
then turns and mounts up, higher and higher,
waving (damn fool!) from the height of his bliss,
whirled out like the topmost spark of a fire.

And the blaze is kindled by all his years
as a last-born, follower, third man on the rope
oppressed by the company he must keep:
the oxygen of a mother's fears,
and father's rules, a tape with a loop.

No sage, no art-encrusted connoisseur
saw the Lakes like this; nor you and me.
The poet trusts only to metaphor
but the poet's son knows how to fly,
what inspiration is really for,

the code of the competent: lightly keep
skimming the silence, smile into your beer.
Words for the wordy, parsons for sheep,
and the rush of the angel nowhere, nowhere
but waking out of the family sleep.

The Harrowing of the North

1.

You never know what you'll be surprising
in the bottomless valleys of Durham—
whippets, American football, a round dozen
from the Poly quantifying boredom

among ex-miners hefting a wash
of crimson lake over
and above the rolling wave
of cartridge paper

thumb-tacked to a desk
in the Infants—bitter
at night—as teacher lass

gets skylines bled
of all that racket and clutter
where Consett once stood.

2.

Twelve miles as the rook
in *Macbeth* creaks off to the wood
lies the chemical dump at Siddick,
a short run from Sellafield.

Open-cast mines, subbed out *pro-tem*
by the NCB; and the soapy
works at Whitehaven
lathering half the Irish Sea.

A lonely tocsin sounds
out on the Solway:
fish out of bounds

here, lobsters kaput, gulls
nursing their grievance far away
inland, on dumps and spills.

3.

When the big new THORP plant comes onstream
in nineteen-ninety-something
we shall, the boffins say, be reckoning

up millisieverts of radioactive crackle
in fractions of the insouciant waffle
that once passed for safety. Piffle

is largely retroactive in this
industry, existing always and forever lost
in some British Standard Past Tense
of Nemesis,

otherwise known as not-in-the-public-
interest, right Simon? Let that
video unit get cracking quickly
and check the lettering on the doormat.

4.

The last pair of eagles in the north
mounts a round-the-clock watch
on a variegated batch
of anoraks tightening their girth

on the heritage industry:
shepherd's numerals for brunch, say,
then 'Carlisle . . . [O planner's fantasy]
Great Border City'

for tea. The twa corbies
have pecked out their message
from Millom to Dumfries:

gentrified pillage
fleece over fleece
village by village.

Dunmail Raise

On the day of the big snow
the Vale of Grasmere
swallowed hard and took a vow
of silence. Michael's sheep were
getting hard to find. Dove Cottage
(née the *Dove & Olive Bough*)
was turning whiter
than a whited sepulchre.
The lake froze solid, turning a blind eye.

Back at the Nab
the ghosts of Quince and Hartley
went on babbling, blab blab
glug. The Scar looked swell.
Helm Crag wore its plumage well
going nowhere in the grandest style.

Halfway up the Raise
my waggon skittered off and swerved
about in many ways
as though King Dunmail woke up, heaved
his chest, then looked off west
to crave a boon
and parley with his opposite number
over the water, Pat Mael Duin;
or, failing that, the poet Wordsworth
noted for his walking sideways
going boom boom boom.

It seemed that someone was anxious
to influence my way home,
so there I was among the giants
facing back the way I'd come.

The old isolation ward on the tops
is feverish now with anoraks,
crampons, pitons, ice-picks, all
the stuff that's really off the wall,

searching out dark spots of time
for the gospel of the ultimate climb.
Three hefty lads, three Michelin men
whose stubble was a quickset hedge,
all set to saunter up Helvellyn
and cartwheel back down Striding Edge
soon got me on my travels again

and me and the car
rowed slowly up the length of Thirlmere
(past the rock that Rawnsley pinched
from the Water Board of Manchester,
for several parties had once inched
certain initial letters there)
and on down the valley, still in thrall
to the several billion tons of snow
sparkling all over St John's in the Vale,
nowhere more than on Castle Rock
whose lineaments once gratified
the big bow-wow of Sir Walter Scott;
where one cold midnight De Quincey rather
fancied he saw a frosty moon-bather
flat on his back in the middle of the week
and wisely decided not to speak ...

And so into Keswick, by Shelley's cottage,
round past the school where the anthill was—
Aunts Southey and Lovell and Coleridge—
and everybody was dearest coz
until they grew up, and could hear no more
the merry, merry minstrelsy
of the fading, falling Falls of Lodore
or the hunger pangs of Papa Bear
honeying the nursery ...
and Sam's great view of Borrowdale
was borrowed only to see him fail.

There goes my road
on past the master's *Dejection Ode*,
round by Crosthwaite's paean of trees

where Southey is parked on his hands and knees
north by west of the sturdy nave
in a protestant—Brazilian grave.

The fine new road goes broad and straight
(straight and broad the road goes on)
along the margins of Bassenthwaite
where Skiddaw keeps a friendly eye on
the Mirehouse literary lion

and the arm that reaches up for the sword
out of the bosom of the mere
belongs to the Lake District Tourist Board
chaired by Hon Sir Bedivere

and so, past Cockermouth's castle walls
where ghosts are said to walk at night
through town to my not quite marble halls
though the TV could be mystic samite . . .

(Both the dogs began to howl.
I thought at first I'd lost my yale
but it was safe, foregrounded in
Cole's Notes to *The Advancement of Learning*.)

There on the screen a young man makes
fresh copy out of *The Land of the Lakes*,
humping his cables, mikes and masses
of fully-frontal Claude glasses
in which you can see, look! clear as a whistle
old Dunmail turning into Ken Russell
brandishing his Panaflex
at mother nature's teeming sex,
the spontaneous overflow of nipple,
delta, omega, omphalos,
or what you will, or deep chiasmus.
'Cut!' he roars, 'It's in the can'

and dies back down
beneath his desecrated cairn—
the one they moved to build a road
might help you up it when it snowed—
that no-one scratched initials on.

Cradle Song

The sirens wailed: crowds of shadows fled
far down into the darkness, pressed together
as though to wall the living from the dead.

My cradle, mother told me, was a leather
bag, or soap box, rocked upon her knee
while voices rose and fell for hours together,

straining to catch the movements of a sky
gone dark, a waypath for unfriendly wings
that brushed all earth awake. Including me,

she said; for though they sang me all the nothings
in the book, soothed and rocked me all night long,
I slept no more than their imaginings—

a babe all blissful on the wings of song—
or summer curlews; and looked up at them
as wide awake as mother's wedding ring.

Yesterday, when rain had streaked the car
with little bombs of dust, I thought how weird
that skies should rain down dirt, and freshen fear

they laid to rest with thermoses and cards,
old shapeless overcoats, thick socks, a scree
of neighbours, fast asleep on wooden boards,

and that first disobedience of the eye.

Green Over Blue

The village by the sea
was deadly boring to a boy
for waves struck at the pier
only because the pier was there
and great liners sailed
off to encounter the world

leaving their agitated wash
fraying the shallows of the beach
where seagulls muscled in
on a dead salmon
bruised quiet as mud, then
clapped off screeching

like baptists. The second coming
if there was to be one
took the form of wave or leaf
or swimmable New Forest
streams, a fallen log across
that clear and meditative face.

What can be done with a tree
but climb it? And a rusty yew
that won't turn into Robin's bow
or bend across a naked knee,
with hazel arrows, hard to fledge,
cut green and perfect from the hedge?

Old Fraser had barbed-wire
tweeds, club tie, an arctic glare
all week. His short black cane
barked even the hardest palm.
You weren't to shout. On poppy day
he wore his medals. Penelope

Young, the robin of our class,
God gave to smile at me at last.
She offered up her face. I bit
a portion from her apple cheek
and chewed it half a lifetime, till
I'm grown around that secret smile—

the russet and the leaf that hides
its growing. Still the waves
lap at me. If not sea it was
the Cotswolds, or the northern fells,
for cities rose and fell in a flash
and my flesh was somehow grass

imprinted with that village hue:
in either case, green over blue
chasing each other, as the weight
of tides broke on the Isle of Wight
or shadows of low jets were thrown
like tomahawks across Old Man.

Love in a mist, love's origin
in sudden hapless parenting—
what grey roof or pavement could
assuage a heart, as well as mud?
I've circled all the globe, I've
known the rich, and grown a slave,

pitched my tent in New York's glare,
been to Japan, been everywhere
that offered spells to educate
a stubborn mind, a backward heart
lost now to all but that low roar
in wind, the sea upon the shore.

Downpipes

after Novella Matveyeva

Straight as arms
down a soldier's blouse
the downpipes stand
on every house,
black and mouldy,
furred with moss,
old mouths gossiping
of pain and loss.

The rain trickles out
through iron joints
and the rusty old spout
sputters and talks,
whispering secrets,
a winter's tale
of cracked regrets
blurted out to a fool.

Yes, I believe you.
Behind this wall
there was lies, suffering,
inconceivable
dearth, stray kindness
shuffling its clogs,
a cold slow damp
on kitchen flags.

Shut up, can't you?
We don't want to hear
that endless rehearsal,
canonical blur
fogging the entry,
choking up drains.
We're young. We'll make up
our own tunes.

Drips galore.
Stone slimed and green.
Never a silence.
The rain ticks down
and you must utter
your pebble of truth
sucked smooth as time
in an open mouth.

Stare at the Moon

'One day a young English poet will write a sonnet to it'—*The Observer* on Charles Johnston's translation of *Eugene Onegin*.

'Literature is the folklore of the educated'—Louis Simpson.

I'm not so young, but I'll oblige,
and in the master's stanza too.
Shakespeare made it all the rage.
Byron packed it in his shoe.
In Milton's and in Wordsworth's hands
it thundered in upon the sands
of being. Hopkins made it weep
for his sad self. Donne made it deep.
Yeats climbed aboard the shuttle, Keats,
and soared off into the sublime.
Owen worked in pararhyme
clipping the wings of Paracletes.
So master-spirits raise up storms
by conjuring the form of forms.

That's quite enough by way of proem.
I come to raise my English hat
to Pushkin, and to Pushkin's poem,
translated by a diplomat—
who else?—presenting his credentials
at the court of bare essentials,
youth, love, tears, art, dreams, space, time
housed in a palace built of rhyme—
theme of many a turgid lecture!
I'd rather weave a circle, thrice,
and point you at their joint device,
this miracle of architecture
floating on cyrillic stems
where Neva meets the river Thames.

Eugene's Childe Harold, in a huff,
 a moody Dane, young Lochinvar.
 And Tanya's all the dreamy stuff
 that ever swung upon a star.
 His pain is mine. Her guileless art
 has stamped its foot upon my heart.
 Who has not perished in the fire
 of Russia's prose, 'proud Albion's lyre,'
 deconstructed through and through
 then put together, whole again,
 by red blood flowing through a pen
 that stains a wilderness of snow?
 Inspired, we rush to man the plough
 of our own story, anyhow

so long as breath breathes us a word,
 so long as, in this middle way,
 we take our flight—matchless, absurd—
 thorough the woods of DNA.
 With Keats's blush, and Marlowe's strut,
 and Rilke's throne of angels (but
 instantiated, made anew
 for more than just a solemn few),
 let's meet halfway, as best we can,
 the author, authorising us
 to write him a tumultuous
 rewording of his godlike plan,
 namer of names! lord of all lust!
 yet shy of men, and dry as dust.

My Tatyana, mind and heart,
 has come in three quite different styles.
 To catch the throb of her least part
 I'd need Donne's skills, or Raphael's.
 I'll tell you this, though. Each possessed
 within that holy source, the breast,
 those qualities we're loth to praise
 since theorists mended our ways.
 Put to the question, what poor male
 would pass the test, with his belief

that woman has a higher brief,
 the word made flesh, and flesh made whole,
 an ever-loving spring of tact,
 while men froth up with 'truth' and 'fact'?

I know it's sentimental to
 impute to one sex all the good
 or bad. I know that quite a few
 are witches, wodwos. If I could
 I'd vote myself a spell of years
 among my women friends and peers
 as one of them, see how it feels
 to wear men's fictions at my heels;
 try out Diana's looks and brains,
 read books with Lyn, climb high with Jan
 among the torrents of Old Man,
 squeeze both my hips in Olive's jeans,
 go ape with Liz, oracular
 in pre-Socratic Greek, with Fleur.

Or then again with Tanya, wide-
 eyed, waiting all this time for me
 to fall off Rosinante's hide
 and get down to real history.
 My Tanya, that is, pianist
 and painter; next, biologist
 who spoke in flowers, and dreamed in song
 four preternatural summers long;
 and then the other, girl-gazelle,
 born to sniff the mountain air
 and shake out her great mane of hair
 along the ridges of the fell.
 Each had a plethora of means.
 One day I'll write *A Book of Genes*,

a treatise on the wrist, the neck,
 bare legs and arms, the creases, moles
 of hairs and moles and goldenfleck
 seeding themselves on backs and throats.
 These have their analogues in thought.

That's why the spirit is so fraught,
 so torn between the soviet
 of bodies, instinct's A to *stet*,
 and reason's lonely, selfish pride
 which doubts that it's worthwhile to take
 a header in the lovers' lake
 and contradiction in its stride.
 What can't be found, and won't be lost,
 and haunts us still: our holy ghost.

My good intentions, see, are fine.
 Like yours, no doubt. But in the end
 we toe the atavistic line
 of fearful love, make do and mend
 what's past all mending. Keats's blush,
 pure native sunrise of the flesh,
 redeems, in part, a world gone dark,
 the lower decks of Noah's ark
 where instincts are all elemental.
 Lesson one: adapt or die.
 We're into that, that livid sky
 at once indifferent, sacramental.
 Blue globe, white cloud, spores, orts and speech.
 Onegin, dumb, patrols the beach:

'culture, so far from healing, hurts us.'
 What a line . . . Yet worth a thought.
 (The context's manners; Russia versus
 western decadence.) He brought
 a well-stocked mind to bear, he looks
 Romanticism's master-books
 full in the face, and finds them bare
 of sound and sense, full of hot air.
 Alexander, it takes one to . . .
 er . . . know one, if you get my drift.
 Liberty stood there in her shift
 stirred more than discontent in you.
 Your gentle scoff at liberalism
 in art and love's a Russian schism

detectable both then and now.
 We have a version of it here.
 Some see the stars. Some see the plough.
 The prudent cit still cocks an ear.
 Aesthetics into politics
 won't go, for all the dirty tricks
 department does its level best.
 And yet this nice empiricist
 deduction—'spheres of influence'—
 means Leonardo's, Mozart's sense
 never yet unclenched a fist;
 and likewise that the artist's will
 is no more than a weekend skill.

Questions go up into the air
 quite literally. Think how a voice
 when asking, sounding, rapt in prayer
 curves up and out to empty space;
 and how the voice goes heavy, flat,
 puts on lead sinkers and a hat
 and plods along the ocean floor
 when bible-wise and certain-sure.
 We need more one, they need more other.
 Never did contraries so stand
 in need of fruitful, common land
 as *L'art pour l'art*, artless Big Brother.
 Perhaps they'll meet, as opposites do,
 when Hegel stoops to tie his shoe.

' . . . Only in January the snow,
 night of the second, starting flaking.'
 My birthday, reader. Pushkin knew
 right about then I'd soon be waking,
 Year of Our Lord One Nine Three Nine.
 The continental world was shaking
 as Hitler marched across the Rhine.
 Sad dupes, and governments, were quaking.
 More soldiers fed the Maginot Line.
 The hands of Chamberlain were faking
 peace, on paper. Peace would be fine,

Great Britain's for the simple taking
if only words meant what they say.
If not, then more than words would die.

Buzz-bombs doodled a stopping path.
Into the shelter for hours and hours.
I grew up in the aftermath
of the burning of the topless towers.
London, Coventry, Plymouth . . . The rule
was 'Do as you're told,' at home and school
'Grin and bear it.' 'It could be worse.'
Backs to the wall, then into the hearse.
In my house all the thirties meant
was men on the street, men at war,
fighting they hardly knew what for
one or another government.
The blitz spelled out our future in
the ABC of socialism.

Basta. I'm not about to mount
the scaffold of my life and times,
or give a full and frank account
of childish games and adult crimes.
Pace Wordsworth, they're all one;
the child who reels by wood and stone
mimicking owls' tremulous cry
calls down the fact that he must die.
Poet, soldier, thinker, meet
in burning forests of the night.
Club-fisted Keats adored to fight.
Kit Marlowe was so indiscreet
in doubting all the rules of men
he rushed upon a sharpened pen.

Evgeny didn't rush at all
and when he did it was too late.
One minute, cold and cynical,
the next despairing, desolate;
pierced by the simple verb 'to know,'
this schizophrenic to and fro

between repulsion and attraction,
body's pull, reason's detraction,
half-Lensky, half-Onegin, half
a roué, half an innocent,
half-black, half-white, half-penitent
(and wholly his own predicament)
he writes his final epitaph
in red, on snow—such a neat symbol!—
the universal calling card
of the Great Bear, serf, master, bard,
staking all on one last gamble;
Russian boor, Russian sublime
met in one Holy Russian rhyme.

The props are gone. The stage is stark.
'Post-modern' now, post-everything
that set a golden bird to sing
or Pushkin blazing in the dark.
But underneath we're just the same
whatever sort of fancy name—
Le Néant, Anger, Alienation—
upholsters our old desperation.
From boredom we too run a mile.
We pick and choose, call out a style
in sex, in money, school and church,
in science, and so-called research.
Hence my three Tanyas, my poor reach-
me-down Onegin, dropping names.
I simmer nicely in the flames
of brazen parts and dull pastiche.

Et in arcadia ego, says
the runic madman, strong and tall,
fixated on such cadences;
I want it now, I want it all,
every one of this world's goods,
'the total ownership of woods,'
wind and wave and woman-weather,
verse and prose, thrown all together.
That's our story, that's the game,

micro-, macro-, mucho. Riddle
me Lord of Hosts, the Cat and Fiddle,
cyrillic, English, all the same.
Author! Author! Where's Eugene?
What does your poem really mean?

Like *Godot*, nothing happens much.
Love doesn't get to coincide
with her and him. It loses touch
so there's no husband, no sweet bride.
When one is ready, t'other's not.
They fail to consummate the plot—
much as the couplet's searching feet
would stumble, if left incomplete.
It's nothing much. It's life and death.
It's tragic. Magic. Trumpery.
It's Russia's true obituary.
It's genius. A waste of breath.
PUSHKIN: one syllable to sigh
and one of bronze, to govern by.

How is it that the honest man
is lured by death, and hands that sigh,
must set his deepest wish to scan
those ancient windows in the eye?
Is moved by beauty, overmuch,
that writhes away beneath his touch?
The foot once set into a pool
treads leaf and sky under its heel.
One brilliant evening in mid-June
the fells burned in the western sun
so close, it seemed, a man could run
his fingers lightly down their spine.
Larks skelping upwards, into flight.
The cottongrass spread meekly white

across the marsh, laying a cloth
below its ancient lord, the hill.
We trod our own spontaneous path
up to the top. The air was still

as ever it is, as my son was
bounding on ahead because
perfection lay on each next crest,
the Solway blazing to our west,
the big fells, moon-bare, palm of rock
thrust upwards to a wash of sky
as startling as a Hokusai,
threw time and matter swiftly back
into the mind. The larks sang on
relentless as a singing stone.

Will Tanya meet Eugene again
one day, and fix him with a look
that heals up all their mutual pain
in those blank leaves that close a book?
Can he outwit his crazy mind
and seize a moment to be kind,
let go his bony grip on truth,
relax into the art of youth?
If not, we'll have to do it for them
with 'The Kiss', or *War and Peace*.
Eugene, you've been superfluous
quite long enough; now show decorum.
And, Tanya, no more flying kites.
The reader wants his common rights.

One man per girl, one girl per man.
One hearth, one home, one bed and board.
Byron finagles as he can—
the rules are different for a Lord.
If you two can't find out a cure
where's the use of literature?
The rain will set in, airs that kill.
I'll have to walk back down that hill
of happy endings, into life,
whose ragged textuality
speaks volumes as I turn the key,
the rhyme, the page, the door, the knife,
brush words aside, stare at the moon.
The cover's closed. I'm on my own.

BLEEDING HEART YARD

Poems by William Scammell

Bleeding Heart Yard is William Scammell's fifth and finest collection from Peterloo. In his argument with himself and others he highlights the street credibility of the eternal verities in poems of remarkably sensuous beauty: 'stroking the paper as if it were/all the first things and the last,/a favourite daughter's thatch of hair,/thin flake of the moon, a creamy dust.' Poems in this new collection include 'A Life Elsewhere' which won the 1989 National Poetry Competition, 'Dunmail Raise' (Sotheby's Award, 1987 Arvon Competition), elegies for Norman Nicholson and Primo Levi, benedictions for his two sons, celebrations of the north, and a virtuoso meditation on Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*.

From reviews of earlier volumes:

'*Eldorado* ... finds Scammell in cornucopian mood ... He is as much at home in a traveller's comic United States as he is recalling bed-sit days in student London, or rendering formal French poems into English. High spirits, low life and great expectations are mixed up in one big bowl.'

Peter Porter/Observer

'an immensely enjoyable collection ... Scammell is the luck any small publisher deserves and I hope *Jouissance* sells out again and again.'

John Lucas/New Statesman

'There are poems in *Jouissance* I shall be reading again and again.'

Louis Simpson

William Scammell won a Cholmondeley Award for his first book of poems, and has also won writers' awards from the Arts Council and Northern Arts. Recently he was Writer in Residence at Nottingham Polytechnic, and he has been a guest artist in California and in Stuttgart. Currently a Poetry Book Society selector, he writes regularly for *Poetry Review*, *Spectator*, *London Magazine*, *Independent on Sunday* and other journals.

Cover illustration: One panel from the 5-panel Japanese print 'The Hikone Screen' (early Ukiyo-e School), Li Collection, Hikone, Japan.

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ISBN 1-871471-28-1



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